

Book Review by Raoul Comninos

Title: Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan

Author: Anthony T. Kronman

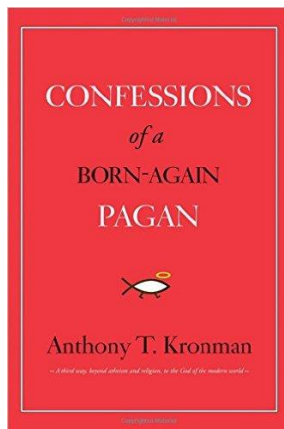
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Title of the review: A considered, albeit dangerous apology for Aristotelian paganism that thoughtful Christians should read.

Let me begin with a note of caution. This is a long book (1076 pages excluding notes) that requires intellectual rigour to understand and complete. It is not the kind of book that one can read at bedtime. I say this, despite the fact that it is written in a clear and engaging legal style. The nature of the material, which is largely philosophical, precludes laziness.

When I decided to read "Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan", I was not sure what kind of book it was going to be. Even after having read the book, I am unsure of how I ought to categorise it. It is at one time a *theological* work, a *history* of key Western philosophers, and an *apology* for paganism.¹

¹The author prefers the word "paganism" to "pantheism", because the pantheism to which he subscribes

The word "confessions" in the title is a deliberate attempt to imitate the famous title "The *Confessions* of St Augustine", which is the supreme *apologia* for the Christian faith. The word thus suggests that this is an apology in that tradition, albeit for the *exact opposite* of what Augustine argued. (Augustine's was an apology *against* paganism, while "Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan" is an apology *for* paganism.)

The phrase "paganism" in the title refers to the *philosophical view* of the world as divine, while the phrase "born again" has the effect of suggesting that the approach of the book is a reworking (via Spinoza and Nietzsche) of an older paganism, and not simply a restatement of it. The phrase "born-again" is not—it seems—intended to serve as a provocative challenge to "born again" Christians.

The book as a whole is a vigorous *intellectual* defense of the philosophical position first articulated by Aristotle that the world is *divine* and that our engagement in it must be guided by *reason*. The author goes beyond Aristotle, however, in asserting that the world is *wholly* divine, a thought to which Aristotle did not subscribe. Other key features of pagan thought are that the world is our true home, happiness is the basis for all morality, pride is good, the world has no cause outside of itself, and, in the new paganism, individuality is sacrosanct, the eternal is present in the passing moment, and the meaning of life is to be found in what is *banal* (see the index below). Paganism was rejected by Christianity which argued that the world and God are distinct realities, that the world was created out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), and that reason must be subordinate to faith.

Kronman's work as a whole can be described as a philosophical engagement with those thinkers *who themselves engaged with Aristotle*. The latter lies at the heart of the entire work. To my mind the great strength of the book lies in its detailed and vivid descriptions of Aristotle's thinking. Of particular note is the satisfying account of Aristotle's basic philosophy of happiness as set out in his *Ethics* (see Index). In addition to Aristotle,

has elements of Christian thought within it, notably, the intelligibility and beauty of the world, as well as the infinite value of individual things (p. 26).

Kronman goes on to offer eminently clear summaries of the main philosophical responses to Aristotle, including those of the Stoics, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Kant, et al. Kronman's gift is being able to penetrate into the heart of these thinkers and present their ideas in a way that one can readily follow. He also tackles them without prejudice with regards his own position. For instance, though a self-described "pagan", his analysis of Luther's theology was accurate, sensitive, and balanced. As a Protestant Christian I appreciated this. I also learned a great deal about these thinkers and was able to understand for the first time some of the major differences in their thinking.

Kronman's critique of Christianity is centered in its idea of God as Creator, and in its doctrine of grace. These two ideas to his mind serve to so separate man from God that God becomes unreachable and God's grace so overwhelming that it creates a desire on man's part to free himself of the divine altogether. The unintended consequence of "grace" is that, since it cannot be repaid, man resents his position of indebtedness, and thus seeks to become God himself, and free himself of the burden of not being able to give something back to God commensurate with the gift of salvation. Such a temptation does not occur within paganism, which is thus held forward as an alternative, more viable intellectual position. The book adopts a mediating approach. Kronman rejects both modern day Atheism, which, he argues, is an outflow of Christian thinking, and he rejects the basic premise of Christianity that God created the world out of nothing, which he describes as *the* uniquely Christian idea. Kronman proposes a middle path, that of "paganism". This is the only intellectual position that safeguards the divine, while avoiding those pitfalls inherent in Christianity, and its heir, modern day Atheism. The paganism Kronman espouses is that of Spinoza and Nietzsche who reworked Aristotelian paganism and Christian Theism by removing all limits imposed by both on reason. For Aristotle, the world is divine but not *wholly* so. Some things we cannot know. We can know the "form" of a thing but not the "prime" matter that constitutes it. For the theist, we can only know what God allows us to know via revelation. For Spinoza, by contrast, there is no limit to what we can know. The world *is* wholly divine, and thus by its very nature reasonable and intelligible. For

Kronman, Spinoza's God is the God that birthed and drives modern science.

The last third of the book is where things start to unravel, for it is in this section, where Kronman focuses his energies on Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, and Whitman, that his real attitude to Christianity, hinted at throughout the book, is unveiled. Though Kronman is able to discuss Christian intellectuals impartially, his real agenda is seen where he agrees with Nietzsche that the new paganism (for which the whole book is an apology) is only possible when Christianity self-destructs. The pagan agenda is therefore detailed: *if humankind is to advance, Christianity must be eradicated and destroyed*. It thus becomes clear that Christianity is not simply one point of view that the author rejects, but that point of view he deems dangerous and harmful to all others. In fact, Christianity is blamed for everything bad in the world: It is blamed for the hyper rationalism of the modern age, blamed for depreciating humanity, blamed for the demise of God, blamed for demise of Europe (sic), blamed for Muslim terrorists (sic), blamed for Nihilism, and blamed for the limitation in Western democracy to embrace diversity (see the Index below). The author does not merely disagree with Christianity: he utterly loathes it, because at the heart of the matter, the Christian rejection that the world *is* God is a rejection of Kronman's "god".

This is a one of the most deeply challenging books I have read in a long time. The author is comprehensive in his intellectual grasp, interesting, and writing from the perspective of deep conviction. But the reader must not be fooled by the cultured academic packaging of the book, whose real purpose is to promote the God of paganism (namely, the world *and* man, who is nothing but an extension of the world) at the expense of Christianity. *The author wishes, with Nietzsche, for nothing less that the complete destruction of the Christian faith*. Perhaps one of the most telling sections of the book is the author's analysis of Nietzsche's view of the noble person (854). There it becomes clear that to the author's mind, paganism is for the "noble", for the elite, for the powerful, and for the wise. By implication, Christians must rank among the opposite: ignoble riff-raff, and "common" (Cf. 1 Cor 1:26). One might further ask: If the world is divine, why is it

subject to destruction? What kind of divinity needs itself to be saved by humanity? — for Kronman argues that we have reached that age which he calls "Anthropocene" in which the survival of nature has become man's responsibility (p. 1063). There is then implicit in Kronman's paganism, a doctrine of salvation, but one where man must save "god", the planet, from destruction.

On the positive side: I recommend the book to anyone interested in the main philosophical developments in Western thinking. It will help also students of science to see the philosophical ideas that undergird their enterprise. It is a particularly useful introduction to Aristotelian philosophy and its impact on Western Philosophy. Also, anyone wanting to understand Kant or Heidegger, Spinoza, or Nietzsche, should read Kronman's chapters on these thinkers as a primer. (The discussion of Darwin is thin.)

As an ordained Christian minister (Presbyterian) I would have liked some engagement with biblical authors, but I realise that such is outside the purview of a work focused chiefly on philosophy. Sometimes to my mind Kronman makes the mistake of identifying Christianity too closely with its principal intellectuals, especially Augustine. Yet, the Christian faith, while often guided by its great thinkers cannot be reduced to the intellectual positions held by those thinkers. As for the idea that "grace" is a pernicious idea I recognise that a *distorted* conception of grace can render humans *immobile*. The Aristotelian emphasis on human happiness, realization of self, and "pride", all of which Aristotle views in *positive* terms, are ideas worthy of reconsideration. Thomas Aquinas was able to synchronise many of these into his theology, unlike Luther who regarded Aristotle as the arch-enemy of faith. Where I would not agree with the author is that grace is a Christian invention. To my mind, it is one already deeply rooted in the Hebrew Bible, which the author puts safely out of reach from his study.² On

²For example, in Psalm 150 the person engaged in praise and in calling others to praise is faced with a problem. How can one person or one group of persons sufficiently invoke praise due to a God whose being is infinitely great? The answer provided in this Psalm, is to invite all of creation to praise. The solitary voice of the worshipper while praiseworthy, is ultimately insufficient by itself. However, if all of creation is also invited to praise, if all of heaven's creation, is invited to join the worship team, then God is praised in a way proportionate to his person, and his greatness honoured. Praise of a grand scale is thus a mirror of the greatness of God. The idea has its roots in the biblical idea that not only *believers* can

one important point I agree with Kronman, and that is that the idea of creatio ex nihilo (probably) does not derive directly from the Hebrew Bible.³ The theological implications of the Hebrew syntax of Genesis 1:1-2 is not that God created the world *out of nothing*, but that at the start of his creative activity the world already existed but lacked design, form, and light. I come to this conclusion on the basis of verse two which is a parenthetical clause which depicts the state of the earth *prior to any activity of God in relation to it*.

But to return to the *Confessions*: In a word, this is a powerful and persuasive *apologia* for paganism: the idea that the world *is* God. At the same time it is a book deeply dangerous to Christianity, which espouses the belief that God's reality is not to be confused with the world. God created the world and declared it to be "good", but the two remain distinct, and should never be confused.

Style

The author's style is generally impeccable with the exception of using the third person feminine pronoun "she" with masculine subjects, which leads to bizarre sentences: "No reader of *Middlemarch* can doubt that George Eliot embraces this religion *herself*. *She* frequently endorses values directly ..." (emphasis mine).

Errata

The author makes few factual errors. I noted only two. He mistakenly thinks that John's Gospel precedes Paul (285), and he refers to the words said at Christian Baptism as "words of blessing", which is not correct (p. 372). I found commas needed at p. 290 (with "not despite"), and typos on pp. 285, 290, 337, 372, 337.

praise God, but also *unbelievers*. Even the unbelieving nations (the גוים) can join Israel in praise of Yahweh, and if they can be invited, the invitation can extend also beyond nations and peoples, to creatures, and even to things. In this picture of praise even inanimate things can praise (stones, mountains, etc.) for they too are Yahweh's "creatures". The only group in creation excluded from this great chorus are the dead. Praise remains the purview of the living, which is why to the Hebrew mind, the purpose of life as enumerated in the Torah is praise.

³Like the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo is only implicit in the Bible, but that of course does not mean it is to be rejected.